

#183 ERWIN MITSCHKEK: USS *OKLAHOMA*

Bart Fredo (BF): Okay, here we go. I want to slate this thing. The following interview is with Erwin Mitschek. It was conducted on December 4, 1986, at the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel at about, oh, 6:45 in the evening. Mr. Mitschek lives now in Baldwin Park, California. My name is Bart Fredo, I'm doing the interview and also with us is Dan Martinez, who is a historian with the National Park Service.

Let me start off by asking you to tell us your name and where you were from back in 1941?

Erwin Mitschek (EM): Well, my name is Erwin Mitschek and originally I joined the Navy in Chicago.

BF: What year was that?

EM: In 1940.

BF: And when did you come to Hawaii?

EM: Well, I joined the ship in Bremerton in June of 1940. We were up there for a three month overhaul, then the ship wended its way down toward San Diego and we came out here, I think it was, it must have been about October of 1940.

BF: And what ship was that?

EM: The USS *OKLAHOMA*.

BF: What was your job aboard?

EM: Well, I was a Seaman at the time, which means you scrub the decks and you do your mess cooking and whatever chores that they decided to give you.

BF: Let's go back to the morning of the attack. Before it started, what are you doing?

EM: I was sleeping. Like I said in my resume, the dawn patrol did not wake me up that morning.

BF: What's the dawn patrol?

EM: Well, they used to go at dawn. They flew out of Hickam and they came over Battleship Row. But that morning, no noise, therefore I slept in. And I was finally awakened by the bosun mate and he asked me, he says, "Hey, sleeping beauty. You're gonna stay here all day?"

Well, I says, "No."

Then I proceeded to get dressed and just about that time, general quarters went. And I thanked the good lord that we had all these training missions every time we went on patrol. We had drill after drill after drill. So when the gong went off, I mean, it was just routine to head for your battle station.

BF: Where was that?

EM: I was on the anti-aircraft battery, on the boat deck, starboard side. And we were down on main deck, then we had the casemate deck. We were casemate guns, and I went up the ladder. As I was coming out of the hatch, the boats were tearing up the teak wood deck. Well, I knew right then and there, hey, this is no drill.

I manned my station, took the folds out that was docked around the gun. Put my foams on, relayed the messages from the control officer. All of a sudden, he passed the word, "Secure all guns and abandon ship."

Well, from force of habit, I took my foams off, wrapped them up, coiled them and put them back in the box that was on the splitter ledge of the gun.

BF: How long was it from the time you heard general quarters, until the time you were able to get to your battle station?

EM: Oh, I'd say within a minute, minute and a half, or less.

BF: And how long from the time you were at your station 'til the time you heard, "Cease fire and abandon ship."

EM: It didn't -- well, I don't know how long, but it wasn't too long.

BF: During that period, what did you see and hear?

EM: Well, all I heard was, "Range this, range that." But we couldn't range anything, because all the munitions, ammunition was down below deck.

BF: Were people trying to get it up, top side?

EM: Well, yes, they were, but then they came on the planes came on the port side, hit the ship there and of course we had blister ledges, which normally would be closed, but having come in, they aired 'em out, and they were open. Therefore, one of the torpedoes went through the blister ledge. It caused them to fill up and that's what caused it to sink.

BF: These blisters were a sort of protective device to protect the hull against torpedoes?

EM: Right.

BF: And these were, in effect, open, so the torpedoes came right in. Did you see the attacking planes? At that point, when you were at your battle station?

EM: Uh, no. 'Cause they were over on the other side, on the port side of it.

BF: And you were on the . . .

EM: Nothing came in between us and the *MARYLAND*.

BF: So you're on the starboard side, so you're right next to the battleship *MARYLAND*?

EM: Right.

BF: So you didn't, so your weapon was not fired at all at that point.

EM: No, no way.

BF: And you had no ammo anyway.

EM: No, that's for sure.

BF: Tell us about what happened when you got the call to abandon ship.

EM: Well, like I said, I secured my gun and I went down on the boat deck, and there was a two-inch Hawser between the *OKLAHOMA* and the *MARYLAND*. That's how we were tied up together. And I decided, well, hey, I gotta get off of here.

So I started to climb hand over hand, you know, like Tarzan does. Well, I got about halfway across and I stopped, took my shoes off.

BF: Kicked 'em off.

EM: Yeah. And as I turned around, there were five people behind me, doing the same thing. And I got within about, oh, it must have been about fifteen feet of the *MARYLAND*, and the fellow cut the line.

BF: On the *MARYLAND* end?

EM: On the *MARYLAND*. Well, he did that so that we, the *OKLAHOMA*, wouldn't pull them along with us.

BF: In other words, at this point, the *OKLAHOMA* is turning over.

EM: Was pretty well, yeah, leaning toward the port. But like I say, the man cut the line and I hit the water, and as I treaded my way back up out of the water, I heard, "Ching, ching, ching," above my head. And as my head did come above water, here's the Zero going off the other side.

BF: You saw it?

EM: I saw it.

BF: And the bullets?

EM: I didn't get hit, thank god.

BF: How close did they come?

EM: Oh, I'd say within about eighteen inches.

BF: Of your head?

EM: Yeah.

BF: Was the water on fire?

EM: No, no. But there was a lot of oil.

BF: How many guys are in the water with you?

EM: Oh, heck I don't recall how many. They had these boats, liberty boats were going in between, picking up people. And then the one picked me and they told me to go on the *MARYLAND*. And after I got on the *MARYLAND*, I was full of oil. The man says, "Well, hit the laundry. Change clothes."

Well, fortunately, they had just done the laundry. There were a lot of white clothes. Wiped all the oil off me, put on new clothes. And the man says, "Well, hit the line and help pass the ammunition."

So I got in line and helped pass the ammunition to the twenty-millimeter.

BF: Firing at the attacking plane?

EM: They did fire. They -- the *MARYLAND* did fire.

BF: Did you see any of the attacking planes hit at that point?

EM: No.

BF: You could see the planes?

EM: Well, I could look out the hatch and see the planes going by, that they were aiming at.

BF: Did you, once you were aboard the *MARYLAND*, did you have any occasion to be able to look back and see the *OKLAHOMA*?

EM: No, I didn't see the *OKLAHOMA* until after I got over on Ford Island. They, we helped and then the attack stopped momentarily. So they told all the *OKLAHOMA* sailors to go over to Ford Island.

BF: And how did you get over there, walk across a gangplank or something?

EM: No, they put a plank down, yeah. So there, I got called, the ambulance is coming by. And the guy says, "Come on, help me."

So we went around and picked up people that had gotten wounded. And I just put one guy into the meat wagon, as we call 'em, closed the door, and there was a crash. Well, we got to the hospital, they had to pry the door open, because the shrapnel hit it. Here I was, inside, luckily I didn't get hit.

BF: A bomb went off outside the ambulance while you were inside?

EM: Yeah.

BF: Moments before . . .

EM: I don't know how far away it was, but the shrapnel dented the doors so they couldn't open it. They had to open it with a crowbar.

BF: It would have dented Mitschek.

EM: It would have got me if I had been standing there pushing the guy in, you know.

BF: So what happened, you went to the infirmary, or the hospital, or sickbay?

EM: Well, we went to the hospital and we rolled bandages for a while. Then after that, they added filling sandbags to build the placements, you know. Then after that, they transferred me over to the receiving ship, where I got assigned duty as seaman guard. And the duty there was a the cold storage plants, of all places to be, where the food is, you know. (Chuckles)

BF: When did you get your first chance to look back at the *OKLAHOMA*, that day?

EM: Well, after I got over to Ford Island, and we walked off the ship.

BF: You looked back?

EM: Yeah, when we were forward of the *MARYLAND*, and we could see it.

BF: What'd you see?

EM: We saw the, the bottom of her and one of the keel plates sticking up.

BF: Did you have to walk that bow as the ship was capsizing?

EM: No.

BF: You just grabbed a hold of this line?

EM: Well, I see Dan had a picture there of a battleship. Is it the *ARIZONA* that you have there?

Dan Martinez (DM): No, it's the *OKLAHOMA*.

EM: Well, okay. May I see it anyway, and I'll show you.

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

EM: See, here. Here are the blister ledges along here. Now, this is the boat deck up here, and your main deck is down here. And I climbed across the Hawser to the *MARYLAND* there. And I didn't see her until after we got off the *MARYLAND*, we went off on the bow, and we walked over and all I saw was the bottom of the ship.

BF: What feelings did you have when you were standing on Ford Island and you looked back at your ship and saw it?

EM: Well, at the time, it didn't phase me. You know, because, we were kept busy and our minds were occupied with doing other things. It wasn't until about ninety-six hours later that it hit me. The shock finally caught up with me.

BF: It took that long.

EM: Yeah. Well, like I said, we were kept busy. And it kept our minds off of what had happened.

BF: And when the shock hit?

EM: That's it, that was it. Well, you seen, you've probably seen people trying to shake alcohol or crack now. Well, that's the feeling I had, I was just shivering like a man with the DT's, until it was all over with.

BF: How long did it last?

EM: Oh, I'd say about fifteen minutes. But after that, it was all over with and no more.

BF: Did you see the crew of the *OKLAHOMA* take a lot of casualties.

EM: No, no. That was all -- those that did get out, they cut the hole in the bottom of it, and there were very few that came out through that hole.

BF: Did you see that happen?

EM: What, cutting the hole out? No. No, I was over at seaman guard then over by the receiving station.

BF: What one thing stands out in your mind, more vividly than anything else about that day?

EM: Well, the only thing I can think of, no dawn patrol. If we'd a had that up, it probably wouldn't have happened.

BF: The American planes out of Hickam . . .

EM: Were not up in the air.

BF: Did you fellows talk about that that day, or the subsequent day?

EM: Well, later on when we got together, we talked about it, but it's just, a lot of people besides myself said that the dawn patrol should have went up. Why, we don't know. According to what we heard -- now, this is off the record. There was a big splash, big officers' party at the Royal Hawaiian Saturday night. So therefore, you know, your officers, your pilots and everybody having a good time.

BF: How long did you stay in Hawaii, after the attack?

EM: Well, let's see. I got transferred to a ship and I broke my leg aboard ship, they sent me to the hospital. And then, I was attached to the ship through February. We were going back and forth between Johnson Islands, Palmyra, Christmas Island. We were on a supply ship.

BF: What's the name of it?

EM: The USS KAULA [AG-33].

BF: So after that duty, when did you eventually leave the islands?

EM: Oh, after that ship, I got transferred to shore duty, and then they asked me -- Barbers Point -- and I finally left in August of '45.

BF: So you spent the whole war here, just about?

EM: Almost, yeah.

BF: Were you very affected by martial law? Did it affect your life very much?

EM: No. No. Of course, being out at Barbers Point, having the civilians aboard as employees, I didn't have to come into town. I could get a pass and stay there overnight, come back to work in the morning with them. And it was entertaining going on there.

BF: What did you do when you came into town? Where did you go?

EM: Oh, mostly Hotel Street. I hit the bars, you know, and a few places of pleasure.

BF: Remember the names of any of those bars?

EM: Well, Wo Fat's, for one. It's still there, I know that. As a matter of fact, it was one of the main ones I frequented.

BF: Remember anything in Waikiki that you went to?

EM: Well, I remember they had the Breakers out here, which, I think they built in forty-- '42, or '43. 'Cause I was there at the original commissioning of it, as we called it.

DM: What did you like to eat at Wo Fat's?

BF: Let me ask, because he doesn't know about looking. What did you like to do when you were at Wo Fat's? What'd you eat and . . .

EM: Well, I'd go upstairs and eat. And then after that, go down to the bar and chat with Fatso, the bouncer. The reason we called him Fatso, remember the cartoon Smiling Jack? Okay, now he was rotund and the buttons would pop off. The chicken being -- I mean, that's why we called him Fatso.

And when I got back in for the twenty-fifth anniversary, I went to Wo Fat's and asked Mr. Wo Fat himself, the owner, "Where's Fatso?"

He said, "Aw, no more. He's gone."

I said, "Aw shucks. There goes the best part of my life."

BF: Did you have occasion when you came back for the twenty-fifth anniversary to see anybody else you knew, back when?

EM: Oh yeah. I called up this -- Alice Yee was the secretary for my commanding officer and she was still employed at Barber's Point, and I says, "Can I go out to the base?"

And she says, "Yeah." She says, "When do you want to go?"

I says, "Well, we have free time, such and such a day," I don't remember the date.

She says, "All right, I'll pick you up and we'll go out there."

And I, I thought I was an admiral or something, the greeting I got up . .

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(Taping stops, then resumes.)

BF: . . . anniversary of the attack. Did you run into any people that you knew back then?

EM: Well, yes, I run into the people of Wo Fat's restaurant and bar and I called this civilian employee that we had. Called her and . . .

BF: Who was she now?

EM: Alice Yee was here name.

BF: And what did she do back when you knew her?

EM: Well, she was secretary for the civil engineering officer.

BF: This is out at Barbers Point Naval Air Station?

EM: At Barbers Point Naval Air, yeah. So she made arrangements for me to go back out to Barbers Point, and I got treated royally. I thought I was an admiral or something, you know. Having been one of the original plank owners, having put the station in commission. I'll tell you, I still don't believe the treatment that I got. But anyway . . .

BF: Commanding officer came out and . . .

EM: Oh yeah.

BF: The works.

EM: And I showed my youngsters and my wife the office I worked in, and my desk was there. So I asked Alice, I says, "You sure this is my desk?"

She says, "Well, what do you mean?"

I said, "When I left, it was olive green." I says, "It's battleship gray now."

But what I had done, when I originally got the furniture, I took the tray out and inscribed my name and date and put it back in there. And this was on the bottom side.

BF: Right.

EM: So when I pulled it out and turned it over, then I says, "Son, see, this is my desk," and his eyes just went boing.

BF: The commanding officer?

EM: No, my son. He was eight years old, you know how kids, you impress him.

BF: And he may not have believed everything you were telling him, but now it was . . .

EM: Yeah, he did then.

BF: Talk about liberty, when you'd go into Honolulu, about the clubs.

EM: Well, there were several clubs, I mean there were a few on Hotel Street and the majority of 'em were over on River Street.

BF: Remember any names?

EM: Well, the only one I remember was on Hotel Street, the Congress Hotel, they called it.

BF: The Congress Hotel?

EM: Yeah, the Congress, or rooms, whichever you want to use.

BF: Remember any names from that place?

EM: No. They had a terrific turnover. But anyway, I remember this shooting gallery that this lady had on Hotel Street. She was an old-timer, boy, I tell you. As a matter of fact, there was an article in Life magazine on her.

BF: Do you remember her name?

EM: No. What was it? I think her name was Rosie. I'm not sure, but that's what they called her.

BF: Was Hotel Street as we are led to believe it, in James Jones' book, "*From Here to Eternity*"? Was it a pretty rowdy place?

EM: Sometimes. It depended on the individual. Now, I mean if you go into town looking for trouble, boom, you get it. Now, if you go into town and mind your own business, you have a beautiful liberty. And like I say, I lived through it, so apparently I must have minded my own business.

BF: Some people who lived through the attack, even to this day, have some bad feelings about Japan and about Japanese. How are your feelings? What do you feel?

EM: I have no animosity. I mean, after all, they had a job to do. They're servicemen. They were under orders. And we had a job to do, after the war.

We were under orders. So any military man, if he's under orders, he's gonna do what he's told.

BF: Any of your ship mates or fellow survivors that you have a chance to talk to from time to time, do they still harbor these very negative feelings?

EM: Just one or two that I know of do. But like I say, I got over it. Matter of fact, when I was stationed out at Barbers Point, I had a Japanese laundry lady. And I used to get my laundry done for five dollars a month.

BF: Did knowing her change your attitude in any way towards the enemy, the Japanese, the people from Japan?

EM: No. And then when they got the 442nd together, I knew some of the boys that went in there, from here.

BF: Did you, though, differentiate between American Japanese and Japanese nationals, back then?

EM: No. As a matter of fact, I never thought anything about it.

BF: Had you ever had a chance to talk to anybody from Japan, who was in the war?

EM: No.

BF: Would you like to? How would you feel about meeting a, for example, one of the Japanese pilots who took part in the attack?

EM: I wouldn't mind talking to the man. Like I said, I had no hard feelings.

BF: Do you know what you'd ask? What would you want to know?

EM: Well, offhand, I don't know, I can't tell you.

BF: You played a part in a very important event in history. Does the fact that you did, has that affected your life in any way?

EM: No.

BF: Has it caused a scar, or anything like that, that caused you sleepless nights or bad dreams, or anything like that?

EM: Like I say, after that shock wave I had, it was all over with then, I mean no more. No more trauma or anything.

BF: Amazing. No dreams?

EM: No dreams.

BF: If you had the power to change history so that Erwin Mitschek was not on Oahu on December 7, would you change history?

EM: No. I wouldn't change a thing.

BF: Why?

EM: Well, I'd like to live it over, but I'd probably do different things than I did that day. Know what I mean?

BF: I'm not quite sure I do. What would you have done differently?

EM: Well, I probably wouldn't have slept in. (Laughs)

BF: I take it though, that you're proud of having been there, that day.

EM: Oh, you bet your life. Matter of fact, I was shopping this afternoon and going through Woolworth's and this gentleman come up and he says, "Were you on the *OKLAHOMA*?"

I says, "Yes sir, I was."

He says, "Well, I shake your hand proudly." Then he walked down.

I don't know who he was, just, you know.

BF: Do you get a lot of that when you come back for your reunions?

EM: Not here. Well, we have a USS *OKLAHOMA* association, and we have annual reunions throughout the country. And then we get here, we get together and have a little beer bust or whatever.

BF: How many of you fellows from the Okie are still around?

EM: Well, let's see, at the forty-- at the forty-first reunion, there were twenty-six of us that made it.

BF: Small select group.

EM: Yeah. And there was one of 'em, fellow name of Davenport, he was the first man that they pulled out of the hull.

BF: From the hull?

EM: From the hull, yeah. Did you interview him?

DM: Not yet.

BF: No.

DM: Ask him if he lost many friends?

BF: Oh yeah. Were, were any of your close friends lost n the attack?

EM: Yeah. I was writing to this one fellow's sister. Now, he happened to be up in the controls, and I haven't seen him since. And matter of fact, I couldn't even write his sister, that he had died during the, the attack.

BF: What was his name?

EM: Billy Turner.

BF: Where was he from?

EM: He was from Enid, Oklahoma.

BF: An Okie on the Okie?

END OF INTERVIEW